

## English-Only Classrooms: Ideology versus Reality

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### ABSTRACT

In the formalized context of ESL/EFL classrooms, code-switching is undoubtedly the most commonly observed phenomenon, where teachers and students alternate between L1 and English for different reasons. This language alternation practice in class, however, is frowned upon by many educators since the introduction of English-only (EO) policy and the complete abandonment of students' mother tongue in ESL/EFL classrooms. Advocates of EO approach claim that learning is greatly affected by the amount of exposure to the language. In contrast, critics of this approach of 'teaching English through English only' see it as an ideological perspective, rested heavily on premature and unexamined assumptions. They believe that the use of L1 or code-switching option, with its beneficial effects, is more than necessary for ESL/EFL students at all levels. This paper therefore reports a study carried out to reexamine the practice of the insistence on English only in terms of its pedagogical effectiveness, desirability and thus offer some practical implications for the ESL/EFL profession, particularly in the English learning and teaching settings at tertiary level in Viet Nam. The method of the study involved a 4-point scale questionnaire with 23 items. The participants were 42 first year intermediate and upper-intermediate English-major students. The findings indicated that EO policy did not secure thorough understanding of the lessons for the majority (70%) of the students in the sample. In addition, approximately two thirds of the students admitted being unable to express their ideas freely and a similar percentage of the sample had difficulty communicating with others in the target language. Regarding students' attitudes, around 55% of the sampled students were reportedly negative towards EO policy although a considerable majority of 92% acknowledged the value of frequent use of English in enhancing learning. The most noteworthy finding was that roughly 70% endorsed the use of L1 as an auxiliary teaching and learning medium. Pedagogical implications and recommendations are then provided so as to ultimately achieve the authentic learning of English in a near L1-free environment, where full understanding and participation are guaranteed.

### BACKGROUND

Currently, there are either loosely or strictly enforced English-only (EO) classroom policies at several institutions including universities and colleges in Viet Nam. On the assumption that maximizing the amount of time spent on the target language would improve learning efficiency, many language educators manifestly promote the ideology that English is the most effective and thus the only acceptable means of communication within EFL classrooms. They therefore insist on English as the sole instruction language, claiming that the use of Vietnamese will impede learning. Accordingly, teachers who encourage the exclusive use of English in their EFL classes are extolled to have a superior and respectable teaching approach. The result is that a large percentage of the EFL practising teachers in Viet Nam try to impose a ban on Vietnamese use although quite a few have reservations about the validity of this policy.

Undoubtedly, there are firm grounds to support those who are skeptical of the feasibility, desirability and efficiency of this EO or target language exclusivity practice. Firstly, excluding Vietnamese deprives EFL teachers of the chance to establish affective relationship with their students. The absence of mother tongue also means the elimination of the translation technique, an effective way of explaining meanings of words or phrases. Their unease also

comes from students' piling complaints of being unable to fully understand the lessons. Especially for students learning English for special purposes (ESP) like Computing English, English for Business, Business Correspondence, English for Tourism, Selling, Customer Services or Advertising, terminology is a real problem to comprehend without Vietnamese equivalents. Many students express concerns of being ruled out because of the lack of proficiency in English and wish their teachers could use Vietnamese to assist them from time to time.

## **RESEARCH AIMS and QUESTIONS**

Taking everything into consideration, the issue of how we treat classroom language use is of central importance as it has a direct influence on the effectiveness and efficiency of the process of ESL/EFL teaching and learning. Perhaps the time has come for us to reexamine the taken-for-granted practice of insistence on English only in terms of its pedagogical effectiveness, desirability and its implications for the ESL/EFL profession. This study thus is essentially a form of action research, whose findings could exert a direct impact on practicing language teachers at tertiary level and it is hoped that ESL/EFL teachers will be able to make use of available languages to make their teaching yield more results.

My study aims to investigate the following questions:

1. To what extent do students understand and participate in the lessons in EO classrooms?
2. What are students' attitudes towards the EO policy?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

So as to place my project in the proper context, it is important to examine further the issue of language choice in an ESL/EFL classroom in greater details.

### **Arguments in Support of English-Only ESL/EFL Classroom**

The use of L1 in foreign language teaching and learning has gone through ups and downs with the advent and demise of different approaches favored by a specific time. During the Grammar Translation era, a combination of English and L1 was considered a necessity (Cook, 2001). However, the appearance of Direct method, followed by Audio-lingual approach and Communicative Language Teaching method, signalled the elimination of L1 from the classroom. The premise of these methods is that second language learning should be situated to reflect first language acquisition with a great deal of oral interaction, minimal grammatical analysis and no translation (Miles, 2004). These methods became the basis of much ESL teaching and hence the EO policy was confirmed.

All the unchallenged implications for the teaching practice behind the L1 avoidance movement can be seen through the five tenets emerging from a conference at Makerere University in Uganda in 1961, which according to Phillipson (1992), have come to be seen as natural and common sense. These tenets are: (a) English is best taught mono-lingually; (b) The ideal teacher of English is a native speaker; (c) The earlier English is taught, the better the result; (d) The more English is taught, the better the result; (e) If other languages are used too much, standards of English will drop (p. 185).

Exceptionally pivotal in holding the pro-L2 stance were some prominent scholars like Krashen (1985), who stressed maximum exposure to the target language. Krashen (1985) stated that the ESL/EFL classroom medium should be in English because of the significant relationship between comprehensible input in L2 and proficiency and the availability of the target language environment is of "paramount importance to success in a new language" (p. 13). A further suggestion that he made is that learners' use of L1 in class could contribute to impede the success of exposure in facilitating proficiency. Cummins and Swain (1986, in Dash 2002) stated that if the mother tongue is used together with the second language, students would tend to tune out the one which they felt uneasy about and it would be detrimental to L2 learning. Generally, advocates of the target language only approach strongly believe that it is a

must to 'jump start' students into better communicative performance in the target language (Ahn, 2000)

In Asia, the EO policy has maintained its currency because of support from TESOL publications and visiting academics and schools..

### **Arguments against English-Only ESL/EFL Classroom**

Although bolstered by pedagogical arguments, this monolingual approach of EO has received lots of criticism. To some critics, maximizing students' exposure to the target language, which can tantamount to the exclusion of students' L1, does not necessarily eventuate in productive results (Dujmovic, 2007). As a matter of fact, no evidence can be found to assert that teaching in L2 has a direct causal connection with more effective learning of the target language (Pachler & Field, 2001). Conceivably, importance should be placed on the quantity of exposure to L2 in class. However, other factors such as the quality of the text material, trained teachers, and sound methods of teaching could be even more important (Phillipson, 1992). Phillipson (1992) also added that "the ethos of mono-lingualism implies rejection of the experiences of other languages, meaning the exclusion of the child's most intense existential experience" (p. 189). Accordingly, language acquisition can definitely be impeded by the prohibition of L1 within the context of ESL/EFL teaching and learning because it signals disempowering relations (Auerbach, 1993).

Harbord (1992) drew our attention to another fact that many language teachers have tried to create an EO classroom only to realize that they have failed to get the meaning across, leading to student incomprehension and resentment. With struggling lower-level students, this is especially evident. Instruction in English only simply leads to their frustration (Burden, 2000) and this automatically creates a barrier and unnecessary tension between students and teachers. The alienation of students from the learning process will then come as an inevitable consequence (Patchler and Field, 2001).

Another objection to EO policy points to the fact that EO teaching is very impractical (Phillipson, 1992). According to Pachler and Field (2001), EO appears to be inappropriate and even impossible in many learning contexts. For instance, the majority of the English teachers are not native speakers (Hawks, 2001 as cited in Miles, 2004). If an EO policy is imposed on them, their ability to communicate effectively with students and eventually their ability to teach would be seriously undermined.

### **Arguments in Support of L1 in ESL/EFL Classroom**

In attacking EO policy, scholars simultaneously voice their support for code-switching or the alternation between English and students' L1 as a learning and teaching tool. Their main argument is that code-switching serves many useful functions in the EFL classroom context, either performed consciously or unconsciously (Sert, 2005). Mattson and Burenhult (1999) were cited by Sert (2005) as classifying these functions into three groups, namely topic switch, affective function and repetitive function. In this way, the use of code-switching enhanced instruction not only by ensuring understanding and two-way communication between teachers and students but also by building rapport with and self-esteem on the part of students (Macias, 1992). Cook (2001) also attempted to lay a foundation for the re-introduction of L1 use in L2 learning, where "two languages are permanently present" (p. 418). According to the multi-competence theory developed by Cook (2002), the compound state of a mind with two distinct languages is what renders L2 learners multi-competent. With the same belief, Moore (2002) argued that the availability of more than one language presents a component of students' total communicative resource, which can be profitably exploited. All these seem to be a sound justification for the sensible use of L1 in ESL/EFL learning.

Hemmindinger (1987, as cited by Auerbach, 1993) found a bilingual approach to EFL for Hmong refugees to be more effective than the previous monolingual approach. She attributed this partly to the fact that code-switching allows for language and cultural shock to be alleviated and thus reduces the affective barriers to English acquisition. Likewise, when investigating the

effectiveness of using bilingual tutors to teach non-literate Cambodians, D'Annunzio (1991, as cited in Auerbach, 1993) reported an encouraging finding that the students gained fast progress although the total instructional time was short.

In an attempt to reexamine the impact of EO policy, Auerbach (1993) quoted many other scholars whose studies support the use of L1. As an example, Shamash (1990) investigated an approach at Invergarry Learning Center near Vancouver in which students started writing with L1 and later translated the text into English with the help of bilingual tutors. Interesting enough, when they advanced to a certain point in their learning process, the learners showed their willingness to experiment and take risks with the target language. According to Shamash, when a sense of security is maintained and the learners' lived experiences validated by the use of L1, students are ready to express themselves. These findings are supported by other researchers like Strohmeyer and McGrail (1988), Osburne and Harss-Covaleski (1991) and Garcia (1991). To these researchers, the ability to write in L1 can progress systematically to that in the target language later on.

Nation (2003) cited Knight (1996) and Lamenta-Tufuga (1994) as exemplary cases of how the use of mother tongue can facilitate learners in meaning focus tasks. In their studies examining the effects of discussion in L1 prior to writing in L2, both Knight (1996) and Lamenta-Tufuga (1994) found that the students' active involvement in the initial discussion, which typically included many intra-sentential code-switches between L1 and L2, helped students rapidly grasped the content and gained control of relevant vocabulary in the target language. Conceivably, when first language can assist students in the meaning-making process, it can be said to play a facilitative role in L2 learning.

On a similar pro-L1 stance, Atkinson (1993) promoted the selective use of L1, saying that "L1 can be a valuable resource if it is used at appropriate times and in appropriate ways" (p. 2). Accordingly, in his paper on the use of mother tongue in the language classroom, Atkinson (1995) suggested that teachers need not become overly anxious if translation is adopted as a learning and teaching strategy by some teachers and students. Other studies suggest that L1 translation is a perfect tool for learning new vocabulary. Among a variety of methods, L1 translation is found to be the most effective by numerous scholars like Lado, Baldwin and Lobo (1967), Mishima 1967, Laufer and Shmueli (1997, as cited in Liao, 2006). This is probably because L1 translation is usually clear, short and familiar (McKeown, 1993). In this sense, the use of code-switching can be said to build a bridge from known to unknown and when used efficiently, can be considered as an important element in ESL/EFL teaching (Skiba, 1997).

These findings above show that the use of L1 reduces anxiety and tension, facilitates the affective learning environment, promote integration of learners' life experiences and most importantly "allows for language to be used as a meaning-making tool and for language learning to become a means of communicating ideas rather than an end in itself" (Auerbach, 1993, p. 18). As Piasecka (1986, as cited in Auerbach, 1993) stated, the basic rationale behind teaching bilingually is the assumption that our mother tongue nurtures our thinking, feeling and artistic life.

### **Students' Attitudes towards English Only Classroom**

Few studies have been reported that specifically examined learners' attitudes towards EO policy but it could be expected that students have varied views on this issue. A study by Schweers (1999) found 88.7% of Spanish students studying English wanted L1 used in class for the reason that it is considered as a language learning facilitator. These students also indicated a desire to use L1 up to 39% of class time. Similarly, in Critchley's (1999) survey among 160 university students, an average of 20% of teacher talk was preferred to be in the mother tongue. Tien and Liu (2006) also found that low proficiency students in Taiwanese EFL classes considered the alternate use between their mother tongue and English as helpful towards achieving better comprehension, especially when providing equivalents and giving classroom procedures.

However, while low-level students often show their preference for a bilingual approach (Hopkins, 1989 & Howell, 1991, as cited in Auerbach, 1993), more advanced students may feel the use of mother tongue deter their acquisition of the target language. Burden (2000) reported that although the students in his study preferred the teacher to know their language, only the intermediate group indicated their desire for the teacher to frequently use L1 in the classroom. When it comes to various purposes of L1 use, it was found that intermediate students expected their teacher to use L1 to explain difficult words but not to explain grammatical points. L1 use as a means of relaxing them, however, were welcomed by the majority of these students (Burden, 2000).

Students in Asia also show certain preference for code-switching. About 150 students at a boy middle school in Kangwon Province, Korea in a survey on EO stated that they wanted English language teachers to use Korean about 50% of the time (Dash, 2002). Findings of the same survey showed that approximately 60% seemed to disregard the importance of target language exposure when reporting that speaking more English in class did not guarantee their improvement in marks. On the other hand, findings from a study in Japan showed that the students indicated no general preference for either monolingual or bilingual classes (Dwyer and Heller-Murphy, 2001, as cited in Miles, 2004).

Given the significance of this issue, there has been a surprising shortage of studies on the use of Vietnamese in EFL classrooms in Viet Nam. It is even more surprising when a growing number of Vietnamese teachers and students are voicing their doubts about EO classrooms. Perhaps the time has come for us to pay more attention to the local specific characteristics of EFL learners and classrooms in Viet Nam, which cannot be operated by universal generalizations and intuitive assumptions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Subjects**

Subjects were 42 first year intermediate and upper-intermediate students who had spent at least six years learning English before entering the University. For most of them, classroom code-switching is nothing strange because the majority of high school teachers see Vietnamese as a teaching source and method. Therefore, learning in an English-only environment to them is certainly a new experience. The researcher purposefully chose students that came from 2 classes taught by EO advocates, which means Vietnamese is totally excluded from the classroom context. The subjects were informed about the general purpose of the study and were asked to fill out a questionnaire to show their views on the practice of teaching English through English only.

### **Questionnaires**

The method of this project involved a questionnaire seeking to gain insight into the appropriateness of English-only policy. There are 23 items on the questionnaire. The first set of items asked students about their comprehension and participation level. Another set dealt with their attitudes towards English-only policy and the last set aimed to find out certain situations which they think should involve L1 (Vietnamese).

## **FINDINGS**

The results obtained from the questionnaire provided interesting and useful information regarding the current situation in EO classrooms at our university and the students' experience as well as their attitudes toward this policy. For every statement in the questionnaire, the students were given four response options (1 = "strongly disagree"; 2 = "disagree"; 3 = "agree"; 4 = "strongly agree"). However, the data were deliberately combined across the two "agree" categories and across the two "disagree" categories because the analysis of the data broken down by four categories did not appear to change the general conclusion.

### **Research question 1**

The first objective of this study is to find out the extent to which the sampled students understand their English lessons and participate in in-class activities under the strictly-enforced EO policy. The level of comprehension and participation of these students would partially reveal

the effectiveness of the implementation of this 'no-L1' policy. Data on the students' responses to the individual items concerning this issue are presented in Table 1 below. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Items	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)
1. My teacher introduced the English Only policy at the beginning of the course.	0	0	76	24
2. My teacher never uses Vietnamese in class.	0	0	52	48
3. I am not allowed to speak Vietnamese to my teacher and to my classmates	0	0	74	26
4. I will be punished if I speak Vietnamese in class.	7	43	31	19
5. I understand everything that my teacher says in English.	12	60	19	10
6. I understand the main points of the lesson.	10	17	55	19
7. I find it really difficult to understand what my teacher says in English.	26	48	19	7
8. If I don't understand anything, I always ask my teacher to explain or clarify it in English.	26	50	12	12
9. My teacher teaches us how to interrupt and ask for clarification in English.	12	33	31	24
10. I don't know how to interrupt and ask my teacher for explanation in English.	29	48	14	10
11. I am too scared and shy to ask my teacher for explanation in English.	17	55	17	12
12. If I don't understand anything, I ask my friends rather than my teacher.	10	14	45	31
13. I can always express my ideas/opinions in English.	21	45	24	10
14. I have a lot of difficulties communicating with my teacher and classmates in English.	26	36	21	17
15. I use Vietnamese to talk to my classmates if my teacher cannot hear us.	12	7	45	36

*Table 1: Students' level of comprehension and participation in EO classroom*

Initially, the students participating in this study were asked about the current situation of their English classrooms. Unsurprisingly, an overwhelming 100% agreed with the statements "My teacher never uses Vietnamese in class" and "I am not allowed to speak Vietnamese to my teacher and classmates". This is quite understandable when the students showed substantial agreement with the statement that the EO policy had been introduced at the beginning of the course. These findings indicated the strict enforcement of EO policy among some EFL teachers at the university, which mainly resulted from the teachers' belief in its merit themselves. However, only a half of the students participating in the study admitted that they would be punished in some ways if they used Vietnamese in class.

On analyzing the data concerning students' comprehension, it was found that only about 30% of the sampled students indicated being able to understand all what their language teacher said in English and slightly more than 70% reported being able to grasp the main points of the lesson. Consistent with this response, the remaining percentage of roughly 30% admitted that they found it really hard to follow and understand the lessons.

Looking at the students' responses to their ways of dealing with comprehension difficulties, it is worth noting that while only 24% of the sample pointed out they were ready to ask the teacher to explain or clarify in English, decidedly 76% expressed their preference to ask their classmates rather than their teacher. These students' hesitance in asking their teacher was in alignment with the findings that about one fourth of the students admitted not knowing how to interrupt their teacher and ask for clarification in the target language and a slightly higher percentage acknowledged being too shy and scared to do so.

With regard to the students' participation and interaction in their English lessons, only about one third of the subjects involved in this study indicated being able to express their opinions freely in English whereas a similar amount reported struggling hard to communicate with their teacher and classmates in their EO classrooms. However, it is encouraging to find that, only a very small minority of 19% were ready to switch to speaking Vietnamese if they were sure their teacher could not hear them.

### Research question 2

Another area of concern in this study is to find out what the students think about the current EO policy. The students' reflections on their own experience would represent a true assessment of the desirability and practicality of EO policy. Details of the data on students' attitudes are given in Table 2 below. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Items	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)
1. I like this English-only policy and I enjoy my EO lessons.	17	38	31	14
2. I think the more English I use the better I am.	5	2	40	52
3. I think I learn better when only English is used in class.	12	45	29	14
4. I think English Only is a very sensible and effective policy.	14	43	29	14
5. I am frustrated in my English Only classroom.	17	55	17	12
6. I wish my teacher would speak Vietnamese sometimes when needed.	10	19	60	12
8. I think my teacher should use Vietnamese in class to :				
(a) give instructions	45	26	12	17
(b) keep discipline and give orders	55	31	10	5
(c) translate vocabulary	5	10	45	40
(d) explain grammar rules	12	12	45	31
(e) ask questions	14	62	10	14
(f) present a lesson	48	17	21	14
(g) be friendly with students	10	12	26	52
(h) supervise individual or group work	5	71	17	7

*Table 2: Students' attitudes towards EO policy*

Regarding students' perceptions as a whole, many of them were quite negative towards EO policy and positive towards using Vietnamese as an auxiliary teaching and learning medium in English language classes.

Contrary to the expectation of the teachers, less than half (45%) of the sampled students agreed to the statement that they liked this policy and enjoyed their EO lessons. It is also interesting to find that while a considerable majority of 92% acknowledged the value of frequent use of English in enhancing learning, only 43% saw EO policy as an effective and sensible one. Frustration could play a role in their somewhat negative attitudes towards this EO policy when 29% of the students under study admitted getting frustrated.

A more noteworthy finding was that most of the participants (roughly 70%) endorsed the suggestion that their teacher would use some Vietnamese from time to time. However, despite their open attitudes towards L1 use in English teaching and learning, these students seemed to realize the importance of exposure to the target language and the dangers of L1 overuse. The response pattern indicated that, in their view, the mother tongue should only be used in some limited situations. In response to the statement indicating when teachers should use Vietnamese, the students showed substantial agreement to only 3 main functions, which are: at rank 1, translating vocabulary; rank 2, being friendly with students and rank 3, explaining grammar rules.

## DISCUSSIONS

Before carrying out the research, it was hypothesized that EO policy actually hinders learning rather than produce beneficial effects on learning as many have claimed. This research therefore was aimed to prove this hypothesis with statistical evidence so that we can make some changes to the language choice at our university where this research was carried out and to hopefully contribute to current research in the field.

Generally, the results of this study partially confirmed the above-mentioned hypotheses and previous findings in the literature, which have cast doubts on the effectiveness and practicality of EO policy.

### Research question 1

In terms of student comprehension, the findings indicated that EO policy did not secure thorough understanding of the lessons for the majority of the students in the sample. It can therefore be said that EO policy may interfere with learning, especially for the less proficient students who reported being unable to follow their teacher. This result is congruent with Harbord's (1992) suggestion in that teachers' failure to get the meaning across in EO classrooms could lead to student incomprehension and resentment. Obviously, this is a serious drawback of EO policy that calls for due attention since student comprehension is the principal goal of any educational system after all.

In order to gain more insights into this issue, ways to deal with comprehension difficulties among the students were investigated. The findings indicated that only a small minority were ready to interact with their teachers about their comprehension problems. Most of them, on the other hand, reported seeking help from their classmates instead. This could be partly attributed to the traditional way of learning and teaching in Viet Nam, where the teacher is supposed to talk like "a sage on the stage" and students are to drink in everything without questioning. The big gap in status between teachers and students here has created a feeling of scare and shyness among many students, a kind of psychological barrier in L2 learning, which prevents necessary interactions between them. This deep-seated tradition most likely poses an unseen negative impact on L2 learning in the long run when teachers are unaware of their students' difficulties and students fail to get the right answers to their comprehension problems from their peers.

Another explanation for the students' unwillingness to ask their teachers is their lack of knowledge of the language or low proficiency. The skills of interrupting and asking for clarification in English were found to be ignored when nearly half of the students reported not being taught how to do so by their teachers. This result suggested that some language teachers at the university were fully unconscious of the possible problems of their students and therefore failed to equip them with necessary learning tools to deal with difficulties, especially in comprehension of the lesson. In view of this problem, language teachers really need to help their students more if EO policy is to bring about some positive effects that it is believed to have.

Taking a closer look at the students' performance in class, EO policy appeared to prevent them from being fully involved in the lesson. Approximately two third of the students under study admitted being unable to express their ideas freely and many had difficulty communicating with others in the target language. It seems quite inevitable since all of the sampled students were first year university students, who had been studying English for a long time in a bilingual environment at high school. These students must have relied heavily on the use of mother tongue in the exploration of the new language. Now that EO policy robbed them of their crucial tool in L2 learning, it simultaneously paralyzed the ability of a substantial body of these students, who were less proficient in English, to engage themselves in the lesson. This has led to another unwelcome by-product of EO, the discouraging feeling of widespread frustration of up to 29% of the subjects in EO classroom. This finding further supports that of Burden (2000).

An inspiring phenomenon found from the data, however, is that a remarkable majority of the students were reluctant to use L1 even when their teacher could not observe them. This finding seemed to challenge the claim of Cummins and Swain (1986) that if L1 is allowed, students would most likely tune out the target language which they felt uneasy about. This

encouraging tendency among the sampled students was possibly explained by the fact that they were fully aware of the learning process, and the potential benefits of the English use.

### **Research question 2**

On the whole, this group of students were somewhat divided in their view of EO policy when nearly a half expressed doubts and the other half showed confidence in the use of only English in the classroom. Conflicting as they were, the findings suggested that many of these students did not have as much confidence in the merit of learning English through English as their teachers did. One possible explanation for their fairly dislike and resistance to EO policy is the lower English background of some students and the abrupt change in the learning environment. It was probably their own negative experience resulting from lack of proficiency and low adaptability while studying in these “no L1” classes that badly affect their belief about EO policy and accordingly their attitudes towards it.

On the basis of these findings, it appeared paradoxical that while more than half of the sample opposed to the current EO policy, almost all of them show absolute confidence in the high exposure and use of English in English lessons. The students’ high awareness was evident in the synchronous agreement (92%) to the statement that “I think the more English I use, the better I am.” Probably, for those who were against EO, maximizing English use is a welcome policy as long as it was not equated with the total elimination of Vietnamese out of their classroom context and EO should not necessarily mean an absolute inviolable rule. It can therefore be concluded that we teachers might not have to worry much about forcing students to use 100% English against their will and ability because students themselves would possibly strive to do so the best they can.

Turning to the contexts in which to use L1, the students especially thought that their teachers should use Vietnamese mostly to translate vocabulary. This preference for word translation could be partly explained by the fact that all the participants in this study were first-year Business English majors. As a result, they had to learn many English terms in business, whose notions were almost equally strange to them in L1. Thus, the desire to have Vietnamese meanings of Business English terms was somewhat a reasonable one.

In addition, it was also found that most of the sampled students wanted L1 used for grammar explanations, which is obviously inconsistent with Burden’s (2000) finding. This could be another impact of their familiar way of learning at high school, where Grammar-Translation is still a cherished approach. However, the desire to build a more friendly relationship with their teachers through the mother tongue appeared to be universal when this study further supported Burben’s (2000) claims in that the majority did want their teacher to use L1 as a means of relaxing and being friendly with them. This finding is also in alignment with that of Ahmad (2009), who found that Malaysian students tend to support code-switching, which is “significantly associated with learners’ affective support” (p. 52). Perhaps, language teachers in Viet Nam should think more about the language choice in their classes, since using a language rather than mother tongue all the time would possibly estrange themselves from students. Furthermore, teachers may not need to prohibit L1 use altogether, and instead should be more aware of the instances when L1 can be beneficial to students when they are trying to develop their English language system.

With respect to all the points mentioned above, it could be suggested that EO policy with low desirability and effectiveness does not always facilitate learning a language as many have claimed. On the contrary, EO policy appears to interfere with learning when it hinders thorough comprehension, prevents full participation and creates a psychological blockage. If one of the instructional aims is to find an effective way in meaning clarifying and knowledge transferring, Vietnamese use can be considered a useful tool and a valuable resource in English classroom interaction. The findings of this study then seemed to validate the researchers’ hypothesis and indicated the need to abolish the rigid EO policy being currently enforced and observed here. L1 or Vietnamese in this case should, accordingly, be allowed to claim back its facilitative role in the language classroom but at the same time be kept to a minimum so as not to deprive the students of the opportunities to be exposed to English.

### **CONCLUSION**

## **Limitations**

The result of this study was based on a sampled population of students at a University in Viet Nam only. Therefore, the generalization of the findings may be limited to groups of students with similar characteristics only. It may not be applicable well for other populations with different native languages, educational or cultural backgrounds.

Regarding the sample, the number of students participating in the study was really small and they all came from one single discipline, Business English major. So as to seek more robust and reliable findings, larger groups of students across different disciplines are needed.

One more limitation is that data from the evaluative questionnaire could only provide the overall patterns of the students' beliefs about EO without eliciting the sources of their attitudes and what caused them to think the way they do. Besides, the questionnaire could hardly cover all the complicated factors involved in this issue, so important and interesting pieces of information have been left out. More insights into individual students' thoughts should have been gathered through an interview.

## **Pedagogical implications**

In view of the somewhat negative impact of EO policy on students' learning as described in the current research, it is highly beneficial to remove the L2-only rule altogether and set more feasible non-arbitrary targets on the use of English in the classroom.

Taking into account the present survey results, less than 50% classroom English would fall short of the desired goals of most students while as high as 100% is far beyond practicality. A range from 70% to 80% might be an acceptable level as a starting point, at least to the new students. This level then should be gradually increased over the courses, which ultimately leads to the authentic learning of English in a near L1-free environment, where full understanding and participation are guaranteed. In this way, language teachers can strike a balance between striving to achieve an impossible and unwelcome ideal at one extreme and using the mother tongue far too much, creating an over-reliance on it and laziness among students at the other extreme. In short, a more flexible and reasonable goal for today will undoubtedly lay a firm foundation for a near EO policy of tomorrow.

The next step is to decide how to make this goal across to students. As suggested by Auerbach (1993), instead of making the decision themselves, teachers may pose the question to students for discussion and reflections. Students can be encouraged to talk about when it is and is not helpful to use Vietnamese in English lessons. If students have conflicting beliefs about the use of Vietnamese in English classes, language teachers might need to help them raise their level of awareness about the advantages and disadvantages of the use of mother tongue and to encourage them all to view L1 as an effective and efficient strategy.

However, caution against L1 overuse should also be emphasized during the exchange of opinions as there is always an unclear distinction between the use and misuse of the mother tongue. Cole (1998) referred to speaking and listening activities, pronunciation drills, creative exercises and games as cases when the use of L1 is mostly inappropriate and should be deterred. Accordingly, the teacher's job is to be highly aware of their own current circumstances of learning and teaching, taking into consideration all the related variables to make sure their language choice facilitates the best learning process. It is highly recommended that specific appropriate contexts for L1 use be defined for easy and tangible evaluation.

After discussing at length with the teacher's guidance and contribution, students can establish their own rules for the classroom. The shared authority and responsibility might probably make students conscious of their own choice of language and thus monitor their own performance inside the classroom. Allowing students to have a voice in the learning process in this way could help increase their involvement too because it is a common sense that learning under one's own commitment is much more motivating than under someone else's pressure. This point is confirmed by Chang (1992) with his finding that when students are given the right to regulate language use themselves, they consciously use English more and the teacher's role as ESL corrector diminishes. Tensions in class are hopefully relieved as a result.

## **Recommendations for further research**

As mentioned above, without a face-to-face interview and some real classroom observations, the survey did not allow us to explore some of the important issues relating to



language choice in the classroom. For future research, therefore, interviews and observations should be part of the instruments for data collection of the research design.

Besides, this research should be duplicated on a larger number of subjects involving students of different disciplines from different Universities throughout the country. Other variables which could potentially affect the beliefs and attitudes of the subjects involved (such as student learning styles and gender) should also be a focus for future research.

Furthermore, reality suggests that the views of students and teachers may not correspond to each other. So, there is a need to conduct further research on EFL teachers' beliefs and make a comparison with those of their students. In this way, we would have a more complete picture of the situation and thus could help bridge the discrepancies in their views, if any.

It might also be beneficial to examine further how to maximize the use of English to help students more in their learning process instead of enforcing the EO policy.

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